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The Magnificent “MILE”: Impacting Black male retention and persistence at an HBCU

Robert T. Palmer, PhD

Dina C. Maramba, PhD

T. Elon Dancy, PhD, *University of Oklahoma Norman Campus*



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THE MALE INITIATIVE ON LEADERSHIP AND EXCELLENCE (MILE) AND ITS IMPACT ON RETENTION AND PERSISTENCE OF BLACK MEN AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES (HBCUs)

ROBERT T. PALMER, PH.D.

DINA C. MARAMBA

State University of New York—Binghamton

T. ELON DANCY

University of Oklahoma

ABSTRACT

A strong body of research has documented the supportive environments of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and their impact on facilitating student success. Notwithstanding the consistency of these findings, recent reports and empirical research have highlighted the problems that HBCUs are experiencing with Black male enrollment, campus engagement, retention, success, and graduation. The purpose of this article is to discuss the Male Initiative on Leadership and Excellence (MILE) and to describe its impact on retention and persistence of Black men at an HBCU. Hopefully, the MILE will inspire administrators and student affairs practitioners at HBCUs to adopt a similar initiative to positively increase academic success among Black men on their campuses.

A plethora of research has documented the relevance and positive impact of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) on Black students (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper & Gasman, 2008; Palmer, 2010; Palmer, 2008; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Although HBCUs were created to provide access to higher education for Blacks when other venues excluded their participation,

there has been an ebb in the number of Blacks attending HBCUs and an increase in the number attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The promulgation of various laws (e.g., *Civil Rights Act of 1964*), policies and programs (e.g., affirmative action and federal aid program), and court cases (e.g., *Adams v. Richardson, 1972*; *Brown v. Board of Education 1954*; *United States v. Fordice, 1992*) have contributed to the shifting enrollment patterns among Black students. Notwithstanding, HBCUs continue to play a positive role on the educational outcomes of Blacks. Research indicates that while HBCUs comprise less than 3% of all higher education institutions, they enroll 16% and graduate 20% of Blacks at the undergraduate level, respectively (Allen et al., 2007). Furthermore, research has shown that the HBCU experience propels more Blacks to seek professional education beyond the bachelor's degree (Brown, Ricard, & Donahoo, 2004). In addition, Gasman, Baez, Drezner, Sedgwick, Tudico, and Schmid (2007) noted that HBCUs prepare most of the nation's Black leaders in critical areas, such as science, medicine, mathematics, and engineering.

Despite the impact that HBCUs have on the educational outcomes of Black students and the supportive campus climates that they engender, recent reports and empirical research have highlighted the problems that HBCUs are experiencing with Black male enrollment, campus engagement, retention, success, and graduation. For example, Dancy and Brown (2008) noted a disproportionate number of Black females attending HBCUs compared to their male counterparts. Researchers have noted that this gender disparity in college attendance is not limited to Black students; it is prevalent among other ethnicities, but it is most severe among Black students across institutional types (Palmer & Dancy, 2009; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008). Furthermore, other researchers have reported that Black men attending HBCUs are generally disengaged on campus (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Harper & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009; Roach, 2001). This stands in contrast to research by Allen (1992) and Fleming (1984), who noted that Blacks are generally more engaged on the campuses of HBCUs vis-à-vis their counterparts at PWIs. In addition, research has shown that some Black men at HBCUs are less likely to persist to graduation compared to their female counterparts (Harper & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009; Roach, 2001). Specifically, Kimbrough and Harper (2006) noted that on the campuses of many HBCUs, some Black females are graduating at rates two to three times higher than their male counterparts. Some HBCU officials have explained that admitting students requiring college remediation and financial aid potentially influences attrition among this group (Palmer & Davis, 2012; Palmer et al., 2009). Nonetheless, Harper and Gasman (2008) have speculated that the conservative practices (e.g., feeling powerless to appropriately challenge faculty in the classroom and administrators and policies that inhibit student self-expression) in the classrooms and on the campuses of HBCUs may provide some explanation for why Black men do not persist to graduation at these institutions.

MALE INITIATIVE ON LEADERSHIP AND EXCELLENCE (MILE)

The purpose of this article is to describe the impact of the Male Initiative on Leadership and Excellence (MILE), a program implemented on the campus of a HBCU in a mid-Atlantic state to promote the retention and persistence of Black males. The MILE was founded in 2004 in concert with other offices on campus (e.g., Offices of Student Retention, Honors Program, and Residence Life) to increase the retention and graduation rates among Black males. MILE engages participants in a variety of leadership development, values-building, and intentional learning strategies to promote their academic and personal success. MILE provides an enriching educational experience that help students become intentional, purposeful, and self-directed learners (Chickering, Peters, & Palmer, 2006). Since its inception, MILE enjoyed a broad range of support and engagement from faculty, administrators, and staff. These individuals' support and involvement has engendered strong support for student participants. By 2006, as many as 200 Black men participated in MILE.

Funded through Title III resources, MILE is anchored in two theoretical concepts. The first concept, student engagement, reflects the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities (Kuh, 2001). These activities include using an institution's human resources, participating in curricular or co-curricular programs, and engaging in other opportunities for learning and development (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Student engagement emphasizes that what students do during college counts more in terms of desired outcomes than who they are or even where they go to college (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). One factor that impacts student engagement is the way in which the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities, so students can maximize the opportunity of engagement. Some studies have shown that students who leave college without graduating are less engaged than their counterparts who persist (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Another theoretical anchor of MILE is the concept of "identity and learning," a conceptual framework that emphasizes the relationship between one's identity and capacity to learn (Baxter-Magolda, 2003; Chickering et al., 2006). By engaging in MILE activities and key reflective experiences, students have a better opportunity to become familiar with their internal sense of self; this process encourages meaningful connections between students' sense of self and their choices. Furthermore, certain MILE activities help to stimulate participants' understanding of self-authorship, a concept premised on one's internal capacity to define one's belief, identity, and interpersonal relationships with others and promote development of values, ethics, and problem solving (Chickering, et al., 2006).

MILE's theoretical frameworks that guide its goals include:

1. improving the level in which men are engaged in educationally purposeful experiences;
2. promoting a sense of civic responsibility through service-learning, which enriches the collegiate experience for men by taking the classroom outside its normal structure and putting students in external agencies;
3. improving interpersonal relationships among Black men on-campus by building a sense of community and investigating feelings of mistrust, lack of support, and missed opportunities for networking among peers; and
4. engaging student participants in ongoing education.

Undergirded by these theoretical anchors and goals, students who engage in MILE participate in a variety of activities. For example, students interested in joining MILE write a short essay about their core beliefs and principles, a concept adapted from the National Public Radio (NPR)'s *This I believe* essay series in which various people write about the personal philosophies and values that guide their lives.

MILE participants also engage in a "Common Intellectual Reading" exercise in which the director and participants partake in an intellectual discourse premised on a book about leadership or empowerment. In addition, during spring breaks, while many college students go to popular spring break destinations, MILE participants engage in an alternative spring break in which they participate in service learning and community service activities. According to Chickering et al. (2006), colleges and universities have been engaged in alternative spring break programs for decades, taking students to different parts of the United States (and even foreign countries) for community service mixed with learning opportunities. These experiences are intentionally designed to engage students in the life of the communities followed by reflective journaling and critical group reflection. During alternative spring breaks, MILE participants have been to such places as South Carolina, Louisiana, and Georgia, where they have volunteered at homeless shelters and soup kitchens and helped to rebuild homes for victims of hurricane Katrina. This out-of-class activity requires students to engage in reflective journaling and critical group dialogues. Reflective writing and discussions are central because they help participants make meaning of themselves and their experiences.

Furthermore, MILE participants engage in fall retreats, where they participate in a variety of physical activities, such as mountain climbing, white water rafting, caving, kayaking, hiking, and other team building, problem solving, leadership, and character building activities. During retreats and alternative spring breaks, students also write critical reflections about the events and their impact on them, candidly identify barriers to educational success with each other, and learn that if they, with the help, support, and encouragement of their peers, can muster the courage and tenacity to climb a mountain, go white water rafting, or caving, they can be academically successful in the classroom. Equally important, while

research has shown that Black men are less inclined to lean on others for support (Davis, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992; Palmer et al., 2009), MILE enhances the willingness of participants to seek support from their fellow MILE colleagues, faculty, and administrators.

An evaluation of MILE that employed qualitative and descriptive statistics revealed that the program had a positive impact on students' academic success (Chickering et al., 2006). More specifically, the qualitative component of this evaluation consisted of five focus groups, each of which lasted approximately 110 minutes, and collectively involved 53 participants. Some of the focus group questions included: (a) *What have you done as part of the MILE that has enhanced your academic and personal accomplishments?* (b) *What are some key leadership principles you have learned?* (c) *How would you describe the overall impact of your participating in the MILE?* and *What advice would you have for fellow participants about how to get the most out of their involvement in the MILE?* Additionally, the descriptive statistics included an examination of students' cumulative grade point average (GPA) who participated in the MILE for both 2004-2005 and 2005-2006. The outcome of this evaluation revealed that mostly all students made slight to substantial increases in their grades from semester to semester. For example, while the average starting GPA of MILE students was 2.1 in 2004, it increased to 2.4 at the end of the fall semester and 2.8 at the end of the spring semester. Similarly, the average starting GPA of MILE participants was 2.3 in 2005. By the end of the participants' fall and spring semesters, their GPA increased to 2.7 and 3.1, respectively (Chickering et al., 2006).

Understandably, it may be difficult to attribute these increases to students' participation in MILE. Nevertheless, focus groups revealed that the MILE had a positive influence on how participants' approached their academics. For example, many participants commented that if they could engage in some of the physically demanding activities with support from their peers, they could use that same determination and peer support to be successful in the classroom. Further, many participants explained that MILE promoted male bonding and increased their willingness to seek support from other males affiliated with MILE for academic or social concerns.

Aside from discussing how the program positively impacted them, participants also discussed the impact that the director's passion, enthusiasm, unwavering commitment, and dedication had on their desire to be academically successful. This illustrates that it is not just about implementing a program to engender student success, but also attention should be paid to ensuring a congruency between the program, the director, and its staff. In discussing the MILE, we wanted to share this unique program with student affairs practitioners, particularly at HBCUs, to inspire them to consider implementing similar programs or tenets of the program at their institutions to enhance retention and persistence rates among Black men. Given the outcome of the evaluation that Chickering et al. (2006) conducted, establishing such a program might be particularly salient for

professionals and administrators at HBCUs to help increase retention and graduation rates among Black men.

CONCLUSION

Research on HBCUs has constantly shown that they provide a positive and supportive environment for Black students. Nevertheless, recent research has emerged about the problems HBCUs are experiencing with Black male enrollment, retention, and persistence. The purpose of this article has been to describe the impact of the MILE on facilitating academic success and retention for Black men at an HBCU. More specifically, MILE participants engaged in a variety of out-of-the classroom activities and reflexive writing assignments, which positively impacted their in class academic performance. In discussing the MILE, we are encouraging administrators and student affairs practitioners to implement a similar initiative in their campus to positively enhance retention and persistence among Black men at HBCUs.

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Direct reprint requests to:

Robert T. Palmer, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Student Affairs
Department of Student Affairs Administration
State University of New York–Binghamton
Binghamton, NY 13902
e-mail: rpalmer@binghamton.edu